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SUBJECT: NORTHERN NOTES - OCTOBER 2008

REF: A) ATHENS 01291, THESSALONIKI 078

THESSALONI 00000080 001.2 OF 002

Following is a summary of last month's major developments in Northern Greece:

NORTHERN GREEK PROPERTIES AT THE CENTER OF CONTROVERSIAL LAND SWAPS BETWEEN THE GOG AND MONASTERY

1. For a second month, the scandal involving controversial land swaps between the GoG and Vatopedi Monastery of Mt. Athos was a dominant story (Ref A.) Media and post contacts speculate the scandal could claim more GoG officials beyond the two ministers it has already claimed, as a Parliamentary Committee began investigating the affair on October 30. The vast majority of the plots of land illegally traded were in Northern Greece, including Lake Vistonida. On October 24, the Justice Ministry announced its decision that Lake Vistonida is public property, a decision that Vatopedi Monastery's Father Superior Efrem immediately challenged, arguing that Byzantine-era decrees gave the land to Vatopedi. Efrem also threatened to appeal the decision to the European Court of Justice.

GREECE INVITES FORMER ENEMIES TO NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATIONS

2. Greek MoD Evangelos Meimarakis invited his counterparts from southeastern European countries to attend the festivities that took place in Thessaloniki, on the occasion of October 28, Greece's National Day [Note: On October 28, 1940, Greece dismissed a surrender-or-be-invaded ultimatum offered to her by Italy and thus, entered WWII. End Note] (Ref B.) All invited countries attended, except Macedonia. Guests included senior representatives of Turkey and war-time enemies of Greece, including Italy, Albania, and Croatia. The reconciliatory gesture, made for the first time, was commended by the Greek President of the Republic Papoulias, as well as by all major political parties and mainstream media in Greece. While marching in the traditional military parade, a unit of special forces veterans shouted "Macedonia is Greek and will never be given to Skopje." Media reported complaints by Macedonian officials about the chanting, including MoD Zoran Korianovski who stated that he had anticipated such incidents, and for that reason had declined the invitation.

SIEMENS PLANT IN THESSALONIKI "UNLIKELY TO SURVIVE"

3. On October 2, a group of Siemens employees rallied in Athens, protesting against the announced closure of the

Thessaloniki plant. They also met with a representative from the Ministry of Finance and requested the GoG's intervention in the matter. No government MPs from Thessaloniki attended the meeting, a fact presented in the local "Makedonia" as "indicative of how much the government cares about Siemens." A former Siemens executive told us Siemens headquarters wants to close the plant and sell the land. Local politicians have declined to intervene on behalf of workers for fear of being tied to the Siemens bribery scandal. The plant's staff of 240 is expected to be laid off by March 2009.

BODIES OF IRAQI ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS DISCOVERED BY FISHERMEN

¶4. The bodies of eight Iraqi illegal immigrants were discovered by fishermen on October 6, when they were caught in the fishermen's nets. Among the dead, was an 11-year old child. The incident happened in the waters off Alexandroupolis, Thrace and media reported that the victims drowned in their effort to cross the Greek-Turkish border by boat. On October 31, fishermen discovered a young Muslim woman's body in a state of advanced decomposition in the same waters. Authorities believe that she drowned in the same incident.

EDITORS OF TURKOPHONE PAPER IN THRACE SENTENCED FOR "INCITING HATRED"

¶5. The two editors of the Turkish-language newspaper "Millet" were sentenced on October 17 by a Thrace Court to twelve months in prison, suspended for three years. They had been charged by the Prosecutor for "inciting hatred and endangering the peace." "Millet" had featured articles, in which two leaders of the Pomak community were described as "traitors" and "collaborators of the Muslims' sworn enemies, the Christians." Local contacts informed post that the trial took place in a packed and passion filled courtroom, and that attendees included most leading figures of the Muslim minority community. The two Pomaks have also filed a lawsuit against the newspaper for libel. On a different note, new MFA Director of Political Affairs in Thrace

THESSALONI 00000080 002.2 OF 002

Alexis Alexandris and departing Turkish CG in Komotini Ahmed Demirer gave interviews to the local press, in which they made positive comments about the region and expressed optimism about its future.

SHOOTING RANGE OUTSIDE FLORINA CAUSES FRICTION ON GREEK/MACEDONIAN BORDER AREA

¶6. Residents of the bilingual (Greek/Slav) village of Lofoi, outside Florina, reacted violently to planned military exercises scheduled to take place at a shooting range near their village. They had asked that the shooting range be moved because they felt that its presence damaged their land and crops and also endangered their health. When heavy army vehicles appeared on October 14, locals protested against them, obstructed public transport and resisted police intervention. Seven people were eventually charged with the above offences. Neighboring Macedonia's media reportedly described the incident as an "uprising of Macedonians against the Greek army," a claim refuted by the locals who issued a press statement, denouncing the support of "self-invited protectors." Four Macedonian TV journalists were arrested for filming a military camp during the above incident and were later released, the Florina police director told press.

DAS COLLEEN GRAFFY VISITS THESSALONIKI

¶7. During an October 10 visit to Thessaloniki, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Colleen Graffy participated in a roundtable discussion with local officials and prominent academics about environmental protection organized by the Thessaloniki-based Balkan Environmental Center. Meeting participants agreed to pursue closer U.S.-Greek cooperation on wetland protection and other joint initiatives. The Center agreed to cooperate with similar international centers, including in the Middle East. DAS Graffy also addressed

students at two prominent private schools and a roundtable discussion with university students on the environment, soft power and the role of public diplomacy. She also gave an interview to state TV. Local media covered her visit factually, mentioning her views on "green" diplomacy and her interest in the environmental problems of Northern Greece.

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